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A Capable EU Is No Utopia: Strategic Lessons from the German Presidency



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Overall, as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, the EU proved capable to act. Crisis management addressing the pandemic benefited from the fact that Germany held the presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2020 and could build upon its traditional approach: developing European capabilities, including all governments, and being prepared for the unexpected. Now, going forward, Germany needs to use its experience with complexity and uncertainty to help form a strategic doctrine for the EU.

Germany held the presidency of the EU Council from July 1 through December 31, 2020. Before its tenure began, expectations were high that Berlin would finally present a strategic agenda ambitious and concrete enough to reflect its central role in the European Union – and be a match for the French. Since French President Emmanuel Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech, in which he presented a long list of ideas for the EU, he has been promoting a grand vision of the EU's development that encompasses everything from a European Monetary Fund to a new notion of European defence. But, despite these expectations, Germany simply did not follow

suit. Instead of making grand strategic proposals, Berlin focused its contributions to the conversation about the future of the EU on inclusively building up the EU's readiness and capacity to act, both internally and externally.

When the "worst crisis since the Second World War" hit in spring 2020, shaking up the global economy and Europe's picture of both the United States and China, France was blindsided. But because Germany had quietly chosen to make the EU's capacity to act its theme – both in preparation for its presidency and following a decade of unexpected European crises – it was able to refocus its agenda onto acute crisis management. What had initially seemed a rather abstract and open-ended reform agenda for the EU was then vividly tested by the pandemic in real time. The actions of Germany's presidency showcased in very practical and urgent terms what "European capacity to act" means: the ability to react to an unforeseen event, identify European weaknesses and needs, derive concrete policy goals, make decisions, and mobilize both the political will and resources to deliver and implement the political agenda.

As a result, the EU managed, more or less united, to get through the first two waves of the pandemic and lay the groundwork for the tremendous task of economic recovery by putting together the “Next Generation EU” recovery fund. Admittedly, the EU – the European Commission and member states – floundered at the start. Member states needed time to find an effective mode of coordinating their health systems. But by the late spring and summer months of 2020, the EU had come a long way: it was procuring medical products, building up reserves for critical medical equipment, safeguarding a minimum of free movement, and mastering different facets of crisis-management – from early warning and prevention to organizing long-term recovery instruments.

Germany and smaller ones. Altogether, the previous months have thus clearly demonstrated two things: first, how urgently the EU needs to be capable to act to address future scenarios no matter how they unfold and, second, how crucial the role of member states is in getting there.

FROM CAPACITY TO REACT TO CAPACITY TO SHAPE

Until now, lively intra-EU discourse has focused on defining terms such as economic, digital, and industrial sovereignty or strategic autonomy. While policy-makers and policy analysts have little trouble stating what sovereignty and autonomy do *not* mean – protectionism, the EU turning its back on

though “capacity to act” may likewise seem like just another fuzzy term, it has at least been road-tested – with all member states still on board. In the coming months, nuanced evaluation is needed in order to assess just how capable the EU would really be to act under different conditions. At first glance, the EU often seems to manage to turn its ship around in emergency and crisis situations. Although its efforts are mostly last-minute, ad-hoc, and made under suboptimal conditions with unclear long-term implications, they are quick and effective enough to prevent the worst. This is a strength upon which to build.

Yet, a major deficit has become apparent. Although capacity to act also implies the ability to *shape*, the EU struggles to affect its environment proactively and preemptively – in other words, strategically. This deficiency, which threatens to leave it with a mere “capacity to react,” has much to do with a lack of cross-sectoral long-term planning on the member state level. The fact that member states feel unable to commit to the European Union has negative effects on the availability of resources and the predictability and credibility of the EU’s political action. Consequently, a central precondition for the EU to be a capable actor vis-à-vis major powers such as the United States or China is that all EU players first believe that it is indeed possible. German-style commitment to building up capabilities and preparing institutions sufficiently to face multiple, uncertain future scenarios must, therefore, be married with French-style strategic vision and self-confidence.

German commitment to building capabilities must be married with French self-confidence

This is not to say that all facets of crisis management are going smoothly. As was to be expected, vaccine procurement and rollout have proven to be particularly bumpy due not only to a high level of politicization, but also far-reaching differences between EU member states – including those regarding leverage toward pharmaceutical companies and the financial resources available for procurement or national vaccination strategies, to just name a few examples. Despite such differences, EU member states eventually agreed on a concerted EU approach to negotiations with the pharmaceutical sector. As a result, the process took longer, costing precious time, but ensured early access to vaccines for both bigger, wealthier member states like

the United States – they all too often cannot define what they do. In many cases, their debate has proven divisive. Each strategist suspects the others of uploading their own national notion of “sovereignty” or “autonomy” to the European level. The back and forth between President Macron and German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer in November 2020 about the meaning of “strategic autonomy” is only one example of many that illustrates the danger of relying on fuzzy terms.

By contrast, there is political consensus across member states and institutions that the EU must be capable to act under various conditions and toward multiple actors. And, al-

A DIFFERENT KIND OF STRATEGY-MAKING

Commentators have yet to notice the emergence of this possible new doctrine for guiding the EU into the future. They are largely still judging the last six months in relation to Germany

and its “corona presidency.” But even without the Germans at the helm, the existence of strong institutions would have given the EU the capacity to react to the unforeseen pandemic. More important still, these same institutions seem to be turning the EU’s proven capacity to react into an ability to shape. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has tasked Vice President Maroš Šefčovič with streamlining strategic foresight across the EU institutions. Thus, alongside rather typical strategies on sustainable economic development, climate targets, and digital transformation, the Commission is producing novel papers on Europe’s “multiple futures” and how to work toward the best of them.

This interest in Europe’s long-term future has infected the member states. In the realm of foreign, security, and defence policy, the Strategic Compass initiative points in a good direction. It will contribute to establishing a shared strategic culture and arriving at shared goals in security and defence. As a process, it fills in the gaps left by the grand-sounding “European Global Strategy.” Likewise, the European Semester and other such economic, macroeconomic, and fiscal procedures serve to steer political and economic developments in the right direction and facilitate cross-sectoral supervision and planning. Like the EU’s “Vulnerability Assessments” in the field of border management, these processes encourage a conversation between member states – often those that are hard hit and peripheral – and the Commission about how to jointly prepare for an unknown future.

Still, these strategy documents, procedures, and instruments can only be effective if member states implement and adhere to them. The development of a proactive capacity to shape will require a larger degree of forward thinking and forward planning – on the EU level but especially on the national level. In order to make progress, then, feasible implementation plans are needed on a regional, national, transnational, and European level that are backed by political will. Silos need to be broken down and flagship projects fleshed out. As always, Germany – as the EU’s biggest member state – will need to play an exemplary role in this effort. Consequently, its “corona presidency” should only be the beginning of a larger process; one that empowers the next German government following the country’s federal election in autumn 2021.

AIM FOR THE BEST, PREPARE FOR THE WORST, AND BEWARE OF INERTIA

In order to build on the existing strengths of German European policy and also encourage a new and more ambitious strategic culture, DGAP launched a flagship project on “Europe’s capacity to act.” This project aims to foster an EU that can set and pursue long-term goals while also being resilient and agile enough to absorb and react to unforeseen or less likely events going forward. A multipolar world confronts Europe with multiple futures, and the COVID-19 pandemic will not be the only unpleasant surprise. Europe-

an “capacity to act” requires preparedness and action on three main levels:



Engaging in short- and long-term horizon scanning based on foresight exercises in combination with effective and streamlined early-warning tools as well as identifying risks and opportunities that come with different future scenarios



Setting concrete policy goals and defining the resources, tools, and implementation steps required to move toward the best case scenario



Strengthening overall resilience to be prepared not only for possible worst case scenarios, but also for the big positive unknown future

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